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OPINION | COMMENTARY

# *Leaf Blowers Are Loud, Ugly and Dangerous*

The fumes increase the risk of cancer and heart disease.

By Adrienne Bernhard
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PHOTO: KEVIN GOLDY/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Fumes, pollution and ruined Sunday mornings make leaf blowers a nuisance. But they're also dangerous. The emissions and fine particulate matter these devices kick up are hazardous to the health of both gardeners and homeowners. All for the sake of moving leaves from one corner of a lawn to another.

As a teacher, I frequently hear the drone of leaf blowers from within my classroom. The noise is distracting enough while trying to discuss Brontë or Tolstoy, but outside, where I often eat lunch under the treetops, the nonstop noise seems to broadcast a dire warning: These pristine grounds come at a terrible price.

Most leaf blowers use two-stroke engines—lightweight, compact, cheap sources of power for lawn mowers, tree trimmers and snowblowers. The problem with these crude motors is that their intake and exhaust functions occur at the same time, meaning the fuel mixes with oil. A large share of the gasoline is then spewed out unburned, as an aerosol in the exhaust. Such fumes have been found to increase the risk of cancer, heart disease and asthma.

Children playing outdoors and people who work from home frequently contend with this menace, but landscapers suffer the most. Since many don't wear masks, they breathe in fumes, dust and spores while enduring hours of high-volume engine noise—another health risk. According to a study by Edmunds, an automotive-information site, hydrocarbon emissions from 30 minutes of leaf blowing are comparable to those of driving a pickup truck from Texas to Alaska.

Leaf blowers also pose a severe threat to the living leaves still attached to trees and bushes—collateral damage from blowers aimed at the ground. Air blasts of up to 200 miles an hour can demolish the habitats of bees and other insects and small creatures, which are essential to their ecosystems. The dead leaves that blowers target also help prevent moisture from evaporating at trees' bases, and nourish the soil that sustains plant life. I might ask my students to consider the irony here: A tool meant to beautify our city parks, backyard gardens and highway meridians is actually destroying them.

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Landscape associations and manufacturers insist these hyperpolluting lawn tools aren't bothersome or harmful if used properly and protest that leaf blowers are necessary for the hard work of removing leaves and debris. It's true that dead leaves on a lawn don't disintegrate, and a return to the rake doesn't seem likely.

Leafy trees and green lawns should no longer be our gold standard: We need to rethink our yards entirely. Each fall, let leaves die on the ground, allow deciduous trees to generate new growth, and consider adding a rock garden with succulents or other "hardscapes" that don't require leaf upkeep, and also save water. Outdoors, sustainable is beautiful.

*Ms. Bernhard is a writer and teacher in New York.*

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